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ABSTRACT

Interviews with executives, managers, and entry-level engineers and analysts in 15 large corporations from both technical and nontechnical fields yielded sociolinguistic information about some of the writing problems young professionals have. The first of the problems is the familiar case in which the writer uses overly elaborate syntax and inappropriately specialized or inflated diction. Another problem is the writer's inability to determine the appropriate level of detail and specificity for a document. In a number of cases the writers provide too many or overly esoteric details. Another corporate writing concern is producing the right kind of discourse structure for certain writing tasks. Specifically, in texts where writers should be making conclusions and recommendations, they characteristically use narrative rather than analytic structures. To an extent, the choice of text structure is a matter of training, but it is also a phatic act, which seeks to establish membership in a privileged group. This suggests that the writing problem depends on the personality of the writer as it is shaped by his or her community, in this case the scientific community. (HOD)

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Hierarchies of Audiences and Texts

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Hierarchies of Audiences and Texts

The effect of the context on professional writing has begun to receive considerable attention in the last few years. In "Writing After College: A Stratified Survey of College Trained People," the largest quantitative survey of "professional" writers to date, Lester Faigley concludes that writing instruction "should teach skills that will apply for a variety of writing types and audiences." This argument is supported by the work of a number of researchers, among them Margaret Himley (1978), Lee Odel and Dixie Goswami (1982), Thomas Finelli (1981) and John Mathes (1979, 1981). Mathes states the problem concisely when he says that "current rhetorical models come from a command-generated technical communication model, which provides no criteria by which the technical communicator can make basic rhetorical decisions." He argues for an alternative model that presents what he calls "dynamic factors within and without an organization that affect the technical communication process." This is an argument for a heuristic rather than an algorithmic problem solving model, for an exploratory, question asking process rather than a finite procedure.

During the last year, I have interviewed executives, managers and entry level engineers and analysts in 15 large corporations from both technical and non-technical fields trying to build a model of the writing behaviors of young professionals in the first five years out of college. These writers' tasks vary as you might expect, covering the range of texts listed in the numerous taxonomies of professional writing, but specific types of writing problems occur consistently. These writers have difficulty with a familiar range of surface features, but they also make discourse level mistakes that combined with a good description of the context in which they were made tell us much about the nature of corporate writing and the

sociolinguistics of corporate writers, especially of engineers.

There are two difficulties in pursuing this line of theory. Developing a dependable research methodology is complicated. The kind of ethnographic study this theory rests on resists quantitative analysis. It requires a content analysis of the writing and the corporate context in which it occurs. There are practical obstacles to such ethnography, most notably the legal sensitivity of a great deal of corporate writing , the proprietary rights of the corporation, and the amount of time careful ethnography requires. Few corporations are willing to commit such large blocks of time to academic research that may not directly benefit the company.

The second difficulty with this kind of theory is attributing causative agency to the different elements involved. The same text features can be explained in a number of different ways. Separating the influence of what are generally referred to as questions of audience and purpose, and of cognitive development, from what I want to call the ethnographic issues of personal politics and sociolinguistics is often a speculative venture. I think that this is the more interesting of the two questions and it is what I want to talk about today.

In order to explain what I mean by personal politics and sociolinguistics, and to explain how I see them working, I want to discuss a few examples of the writing problems young professionals have. These are problems I observed in young writers, and they were described to me repeatedly by successful editors and managers, who, far from being uninterested or uninformed, were remarkably astute in identifying and diagnosing their writers' problems. Their efforts at changing their writers' behavior, however, were not always as successful.

The first of the problems is the familiar case in which the writer uses

overly elaborate syntax and inappropriately specialized or inflated diction. A certain amount of this may be endemic, especially with technically trained writers, but the problem is aggravated whenever the writer either does not know to whom the document will go, or when the primary audience is an executive high in the organization. (The specialized language occurs to a lesser degree in informal communication between peers, but this seems to be because they have a common language.)

I found that when the writer does not know the audience, or when he perceives that there is pressure attached to the document because it will go to a vice president or into print, he reverts to what he perceives as the standard professional style. This is essentially a linguistic style shift cued by stress or anxiety. The special terminology is a kind of display behavior, the end of which is to mark the writer as a member of a privileged group in the face of a threatening situation. This style shifting is driven by the writer's insecurity, and appears to be less severe with established, secure professionals.

This suggests that there is another dimension to the writing process. Certainly inexperienced writers would benefit from the knowledge of their audience and its needs that the experienced writer considers in planning. Certainly the inexperienced writer's conception, or better his misconception, of appropriate professional style contributes to the problem. Nevertheless, the writer's stake in displaying a complimentary image, his anxiety to appear as he would like to be thought of, has a powerful coercive effect. Since the inappropriate style shifting increases with the importance of the text, and therefore with the writer's concentration, it can not be wholly due to a lack of knowledge or attention.

The second and third kinds of problems I want to discuss also combine

questions of audience and purpose, with the social function of corporate writing. The first of these I call the writer's inability to determine the appropriate level of detail and specificity for a document. As the qualifier "appropriate" suggests, this is partly a function of identifying and describing a document's intended audience and purpose; the level of detail is "appropriate" to that audience. Writers' difficulty in negotiating this issue, however, increases in conditions that trigger the same sort of social and personal insecurity.

There are a number of cases in which writers provide too much or too esoteric detail. Writers used to producing long minutely detailed technical documents usually have great difficulty writing abstracts or "executive summaries" that call for selection and condensation. This may be partly owing to the writer's reluctance to relinquish his hard won data. It is partly owing to the fact that the writer has shifted genres, and has not yet recognized the difference between them. It may be owing to the inherent difficulty of selecting salient detail and condensing long texts. But the drive to provide reams of esoteric detail has a personal, political function that resists teachers' or managers' attempts at correction, and seems to go beyond the other explanations I have offered.

Young writers, particularly engineers, make this kind of mistake out of a desire to appear expert and an unconscious affection for the rigorously detailed scientific method. Because they feel a need to forge professional credibility, an anxiety to project the image of a scientist, they provide inordinate amounts of detail. The rhetorical task is lost or at least obscured by the desire to establish membership in the professional community.

There are two ethnographic issues at work here: the writer's insecurity

and the self-protection it generates, and the writer's unconscious desire to associate himself with a privileged group and its way "doing the business of science." The way these ethnographic notions combine with questions of audience and purpose, is clearer in my third example of corporate writing problems.

I found that technically trained writers have trouble producing the right kind of discourse structure for certain writing tasks. More specifically, in texts where they should be making conclusions and recommendations, they characteristically use narrative text structures rather than analytic structures. This problem was mentioned by a number of the editors and managers in technical companies, and occurs frequently among technical writing students.

The most articulate of the managers I talked with described the problem clearly. He said that people with technical backgrounds "will sometimes attempt to deal with the question by recapping a time sequence. °The first level of analysis on this project involved gathering external data to organization, and considering demand, etc., etc, Next we, following that, and after that....' They will take it in some kind of chronological recitation of what they did as opposed to selecting from that those key things that will influence a decision maker to accept their recommendation." As an example of this he said, "If, in fact, you are saying that you have to double in size, certain of those activities are the ones that provide you the way to assess whether it is rational or not. The market is going to expand by threefold and the fact that you are only suggesting a 100% increase means that you are not even keeping pace with the natural market growth. The question is not how you got to what the market share should be. It is the selection from what you have done to present in the way that somebody can make decisions about." This is a

remarkably accurate description of a writer's substituting a narrative for an analysis. It is also similar to the problem of providing too much detail; here the writer provides everything, but the inability to determine the appropriate discourse structure is interesting.

There are a number of explanations for the engineer's inability to generate an appropriate discourse structure. The engineers provide a narrative organized by chronology. This is one of the first discourse modes anyone learns; it requires no analysis, no selection, and no rhetorical judgment. The issue here is one of language acquisition. Asked to describe their day, children will repeat what they did in chronological order, providing a story read off memory rather than an analysis. This analogy to language acquisition suggests that in engineers this problem may be due to the fact that these writers have a limited repertoire of discourse structures and fail to recognize the the rhetorical significance of discourse modes. In this case, the teaching or management task is one of developing different discourse schema. We need to show them the difference between different ways of organizing information.

E... we can teach these writers to recognize the difference between narrative and analytic text structures, the problem will, and in fact usually does, persist. Its persistence in this case is not due to limitations in their repertoire of discourse schema, but to the social and cultural background these engineers have absorbed. The engineer's narrative is read off the laboratory log book and report format, where, in true scientific method, they must describe what they did so that the methodology can be evaluated and the test repeated. Providing a description of the procedure is a standard part of the scientific ethos; it is learned in school and reinforced by the example of professional journals. The

engineer chooses a narrative structure despite its inapplicability, because he is a member of a cultural community and because he wants that membership to be apparent. To an extent, the choice of text structure is a matter of training, but it is also a phatic act, that seeks to establish membership in a privileged group.

This suggests that this writing problem depends on the personality of the writer as it is shaped by his community, in this case the scientific community. Describing the process of investigation in a narrative structure allows the writer to remove himself from the communicative act. Here the tradition of the scientific community and the personal politics of corporate writing work together. At the same time that he follows the tradition of the privileged group, the writer can protect his reputation, and his "face" in a threatening exchange. By providing all the data and a description of the investigation, the engineer is giving the reader all the information he needs to reach a conclusion and make a decision. This allows the engineer to deny responsibility for a bad decision, shifting the blame on the reader.

At the end of our discussion, the vice president I just quoted said "we see a level of quasi-scientific neutrality with the apparent hope that the facts will speak for themselves.... We are in the business of being consultants... of making recommendations" and "to leave that [the conclusion] to the interpretation of the reader, in our business, is a fatal error."

It is an important piece of data that people with less technical backgrounds have less difficulty making recommendations and, to a degree, choosing the right level of detail. This suggests that while some of the problem may be inherent in the writing task, a substantial portion of it is peculiar to the sociolinguistics of the scientific and technical community.